

# GEORGES SEURAT FIGURE IN SPACE

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## TEXT PANELS IN THE EXHIBITION

Georges Pierre Seurat was born to a prosperous middle-class family in Rue Bondy in Paris on December 2, 1859, he began to draw while he was still at the lycée. Seurat's artistic home was the metropolis of Paris and its suburbs. He was an accurate and critical observer, capturing in his works urban society and its environment.

The fourth Impressionist exhibition in 1879, particularly the works of Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), caused an “*unexpected, profound shock*”. Still absorbing the experience after his year of military service, Seurat decided not to return to the École des Beaux-Arts and its rigid and uninspiring teaching. This break with the academy must have been a liberation for the young artist. With no academic obligations to worry about, Seurat could now delve deeper into the subject of color theory and its effect on the human eye.

His reading of *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (1839) by Michel-Eugène Chevreul, on the laws of simultaneous color contrasts and the mutability of colors as a function of distance; of *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867) by Charles Blanc, discussed the principle of the optical mixing of colors or *Théorie scientifique des couleurs* (1881) by the American physicist Ogden N. Rood; and also the study of Eugène Delacroix' use of pairs of complementary colors in his works was a major revelation for Seurat. Inspired by this work, Seurat explored the effects of putting colors from his palette on the canvas. His characteristic method of applying paint in small dots, which he placed close together on the canvas, is known as Pointillism. This painting technique, where pure colors fuse only in the eye of the viewer, inspired many of his contemporaries and subsequent generations of artists.

With his masterpiece *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte* (*A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*), 1884–86, Seurat became the founder of the Neo-Impressionist movement and, alongside Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), one of the most influential forerunners of modern art. His life was marked by the continuous and disciplined application of his scientifically based painting style. In the ten years up to his premature death at the age of thirty-one, he turned out an extensive body of work.

From the very start, Seurat considered drawing the equal of painting; indeed, he began to draw at the age of fourteen and made rapid progress at the private art school at which he was enrolled. In the early 1880s, the young man's copies of the art of classical antiquity as well as of contemporary works gave way to his own style, featuring soft contours and velvety shading. He was intrigued by generic scenes featuring lone individuals, mainly road workers, farmers

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in the field, and members of the bourgeoisie. Seurat distanced himself from naturalism, preferring as he did a particular position or isolated movement to precise physiognomy. The motif that would become his signature and the subject of so many of his works, figures and the space that surrounds them, was already making itself felt. And although his painting technique differed from his approach to drawing, in both media he treated light and shadow, contours and surfaces similarly. Indeed, many of his drawings are related to a particular painting, and to his compositions with multiple figures.

Seurat rapidly developed his mature and characteristic drawing style, using Conté crayon to achieve the expressive chiaroscuro contrasts of its crosshatching that particularly distinguish it. Named for its inventor, Nicolas-Jacques Conté (1755–1805), the crayon gained its first great popularity among 19th century artists. As for paper, Seurat favoured a high-quality handmade product known as Michallet or Ingres paper, which is characterized by its pronounced grain, its tones, from pale yellow to beige, and its deckle edges. The company's watermark can be made out on some of Seurat's drawings.

Standing 300 meters high and with a weight of 10.000 tons, the tower was constructed out of 18.000 steel parts by the engineering firm of *Gustave Eiffel & Cie.* between 1887 and 1889. The architect, Stephen Sauvestre, had been inspired in his concept for the construction by the thinking and calculations of Maurice Koechlin, a Swiss engineer. The Eiffel Tower, intended as a symbol of the centenary of the French Revolution and unveiled on the occasion of the World Exposition, was until 1930 the tallest building in the world. In January of 1889, when Seurat painted it, the tower was four-fifths complete. The wooden panel on which it is painted had been proportioned so that the representation of the tower ends at the point it had reached by the time Seurat portrayed it. It thus does not constitute a vision of the future, but rather an account of the status quo. Seurat appropriated the deeply symbolic technological marvel by capturing it with his new technique, to which he added a further innovation: the Pointillist border. To this day, the picture is the very summation of Seurat's artistic abilities—indeed, of his art—and is also the first color documentation of what was to become a monument, recorded for posterity at the moment of its birth, as it were.

In the early 1880s Seurat spent considerable time in the suburbs of Paris, painting fieldworkers, farmers and gardeners as they went about their daily business. His enthusiasm for painters of the Barbizon group, such as Jean-François Millet (1814–1875) and Jean Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875), is reflected in the works he produced during that period; his quarryman is a particularly clear allusion to the work of Gustave Courbet (1819–1877). At the same time he was contributing sketches of well-to-do Parisians in and around the capital. A lady seen from behind, or as a silhouette, and clad in the elegant fashion of the time recurs ever more frequently in his drawings of the period, and was to serve him later as a study for his great work, *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte*.

The landscape drawings from the suburbs are dominated by largely geometrical compositional structures with pronounced verticals and horizontals. Likewise in the interior drawings, the central figures are inserted into geometrical composition elements. A notable feature of the figures is that they are generally facing away from the viewer. Their faces are scarcely or only partially visible,

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and often remain in darkness. They invariably appear isolated from their surroundings and everyday events. After the birth of Seurat, the family moved to the Boulevard de Magenta, where his mother lived until her death. Seurat's parents, who seem to have had little interest in their son's paintings, nonetheless enabled him to live financially independent as an artist. In his lifetime, he sold very few of his paintings. In Paris, he sketched the bustling urban street life, recording passers-by and residents in a variety of motifs. His friends and parents, particularly his mother, presumably sat for his intimate interior scenes such as *Lecture (Reading)*.

Whereas suburban subjects dominated in the drawings, in the small wooden panel paintings produced contemporaneously, Impressionist subjects dominated, featuring excursion destinations such as riverbanks, yachts, boats, fishermen, and numerous people strolling or sitting in the foreground. These small studies typical for Seurat and measuring 16 x 25 cm, he called *croquetons*. The advantage of these *croquetons* was that they fit beneath the lid of a small paintbox and could thus be easily carried around even if the paint had yet to dry. These special wooden boxes were called *boîte à pouce*, and were very popular with painters in the 19th century.

His painting technique for the oil sketches consisted of a broad, generally very short brushstroke with the bristles left flat, partly isolated and irregular brushstrokes, and the ground underneath left partially visible. Seurat created 14 *croquetons*, or small paintings on wood, as well as ten drawings for *Une Baignade, Asnières (Bathers at Asnières)*, 1883/84, his first large-format piece, on which he began work in spring of 1883. The preparatory pictures feature individual compositional elements of a group of seven young workers, taking time off for a swim and lounging on the banks of the Seine near Asnières. The factories of Clichy are visible in the background, as is the north end of the island in the Seine. He then used the individual studies painted on site to create the complete composition in his studio, an approach that married Impressionist plein air painting with the academic studio technique. *Une Baignade, Asnières* was rejected in 1884 by the jury of the Salon, the official exhibition venue, whereupon Seurat showed it among works by other rejected artists at the newly founded *Salon des Indépendants*.

For several months, Seurat was a constant visitor to the island of *La Grande Jatte*, where he did over twenty drawings and thirty *croquetons* on site. Seurat peopled the popular attraction for Parisian day trips with over forty reclining, sitting, fishing, or strolling people dressed in the fashions of the time. The movements of the solitary subjects seem frozen, and no individual features are discernible on the schematized figures. *Un Dimanche à la Grande Jatte* was Seurat's first sustained application of the brushstroke technique known as Pointillism.

Its manifestolike character made the painting the much-discussed centre of the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition, in May of 1886, which also saw Seurat crowned chief of the new avant-garde. His dispersion technique became the rallying cry of a new movement, championed by Paul Signac (1863–1935), Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) and Maximilian Luce (1858–1941) among others. That same year, in 1886, the art critic Félix Fénéon (1861–1944), who had established himself as the advocate of the new painting technique with his copious writings, coined the term *Neo-Impressionism*.

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As of 1885, Seurat began to spend his summers on the coast of Normandy, which in the second half of the 19th century had become a favoured destination for wealthy Parisian vacationers, as well as for artists and writers. The new rail connections, too, helped the region to popularity among tourists. The early Impressionists preferred such luxurious bathing places as Trouville, Etretat and Dieppe, where Manet, Monet and Boudin painted, among others. For his part, Seurat chose a different spot every year, summering in 1885 in Grandcamp, in 1886 in Honfleur, in 1888 in Port-en-Bessin, in 1889 in Le Crotoy and in 1890 in Gravelines. The attraction of these towns for the artist was their small, pristine harbours and fisheries, as yet unspoiled by a tourism that was only just beginning to get off the ground. His compositions made in such places are strikingly well balanced, determined as they were by the exact position selected by the painter. In some of his works, such as *Le Chenal de Gravelines: Grand Fort Philippe (The Channel of Gravelines: Grand Fort Philippe)*, 1890, Seurat even used two painted frames – one painted to mark the edge of the canvas and the actual wooden frame. Their technical precision makes Seurat's late harbour scenes cool and objective, and lends them the cast of severe studies in the painter's art of Pointillism.

Parisian nightlife venues with their colorful music and theatre spectacles, attractions and performances, were very popular in the period from 1884 to 1890. In his last major works *La Parade de cirque*, 1887/88 and *Le Cirque (The Circus)*, 1890/91, Seurat focussed on the colourful activities of musicians, clowns, and jugglers. He had been enthralled by journalistic imagery and popular commercial prints since his youth, and his scenes of goings-on in the fleshpots of Montmartre, at café concerts and the circus are evidence of a lasting fascination. Taking his inspiration from contemporary posters, he transformed his subjects with the alchemy of a Pointillist technique that now also included their frames. *Le Cirque*, a perfectly calculated construction of several imagistic levels, is the culmination of Seurat's taste for technology and controlled movement. The light and motion of the circus tent and stalls are captured, coolly and meticulously, within the confines of a complex relief, itself comprising elements of advertising and caricature. *Le Cirque* is a paragon of avantgarde art. Contemporary critics noted its veritably mathematical precision and cerebral use of colour, both considered harbingers of abstraction. Admired in particular by Seurat's Cubist epigones, the painting was to become key to the modernist turn and an icon of the 20th century. In March of 1891, a week after *Le Cirque* was first shown at the *Salon des Indépendants*, Seurat died unexpectedly at the age of 31.